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**The Pure Gold of
Nineteenth Century Literature**



The Pure Gold of
Nineteenth Century
Literature

By William Lyon Phelps

Rampson Professor of English Literature at
Yale University



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To my Wife



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Preface

THIS little book, which in its first form was a contribution to a periodical, and which has now been completely revised and almost completely rewritten, is an attempt to appraise and assay the precious material in the literary output of the nineteenth century. I have confined myself entirely to British production; and I have endeavoured to be as brief as is consistent with the form of a literary essay.

W. L. P.

Yale University, 22 March, 1907

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Nineteenth Century Literature**

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Keats great departments the last century reveals masters. Let us consider some of these.

Keats

WHILE the nineteenth century was yet in its first quarter, English literature suffered a terrible loss,—a loss that, as our perspective grows clearer, seems ever more poignant. This was the premature death of John Keats. Dying at the age of twenty-five, before most men of genius have done mature work, Keats left behind him a small number of poems that have given him an undisputed place in the front rank of English poets. Even as it is, his reputation is growing so rapidly that the critics of the year Two Thousand may place him as the first poet of the nineteenth century. He was born in the same year with Carlyle. Had he lived one-half so long as the great Scotsman, he might have surpassed all other British poets except Shakspeare; for he had to a supreme degree the divine gift of poetic

expression : none of his followers or suc- **Keats**
cessors, not even his chief legatee, Ten-
nyson, equalled him in this respect: the
Ode on a Grecian Urn, *Ode to a Nightin-
gale*, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, *Hyperion*,—
these show a complete mastery of diction
that no other English poets except Shak-
spere and Milton possessed. And the won-
derful thing about the man is that he de-
veloped with such astonishing speed; nor
was his growth unhealthy, tainted with
the germs of disease, like his suffering
frame. The glow on his immortal verses is
not the hectic flush of sickness, but the
radiance of spiritual health. No one can
read his remarkable *Letters* and fail to see
how steady was his intellectual advance;
how clearly he recognized his own powers,
and the proper way to use them; how
noble was his ideal in poetry, and how
gladly he would sacrifice everything in
its pursuit. Of all the "great spirits that
on earth were sojourning" Keats was the
most purely a poet. His poems belong to

Wordsworth

no age, no country, and no creed. Politics and religion had no real interest for him, as his poems and letters plainly show. While other poets filled their pages with allusions to political and moral issues, Keats wrote about Greek vases, nightingales, and romantic legends. Who can say what masterpieces this man would have produced had he lived to middle age? All we know is that they would have been masterpieces, and in all probability would have surpassed most of what is now included in his works.

“My poet holds the future fast,
Accepts the coming ages' duty,
Their present for this past.”

Wordsworth

IN addition to the name of Keats, the nineteenth century can show five other poets, who now seem to have a fixed place in the first rank. These are Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, Tennyson, and Browning. The first and last are prophets

as well as poets, — each of the two has a right to the name *Vates* as well as *Poeta*. **Wordsworth** They wrote many beautiful poems, but in their marvellous melodies we hear the voice of a prophetic mission. It is unfortunately true to say, in estimating the value of Wordsworth's poetic production, that his high reputation rests on about one-third of his total output, the bulky remainder being mostly chaff. But when his sublime moods become articulate, he appeals to thoughtful readers irresistibly, and is by many critics of to-day given the third place in English poetry, immediately after Milton; for Wordsworth is our great spiritual interpreter of nature. In this field he has never had an equal among English writers, and but one successful rival in the world, — his great contemporary, Goethe. His view of nature is of course a modern one, a view curtailed even to Shakspeare and Milton, for the eyes of humanity grow sharp by time and use. Shakspeare could no more have

Words-
worth

written the *Tintern Abbey* lines than he could have travelled from Stratford to London in an express train. Wordsworth regarded nature as in some mysterious way *alive*, spiritual and immaterial, and able to teach all lessons that mankind needed to learn. The function of the poet is to discover these truths, often hidden from the wise and prudent, and reveal them to his fellows. We need not seek here to analyze his interpretations: it has been done by many a prose critic, and its essence has been poetically expressed in a final form by Matthew Arnold and by William Watson, whose extraordinary poem, *Wordsworth's Grave*, is worthy of the master it portrays:

“From Shelley’s dazzling glow or thunderous
haze,
From Byron’s tempest-anger, tempest-mirth,
Men turned to thee and found—not blast and
blaze,
Tumult of tottering heavens, but peace on
earth.”

Wordsworth drew from nature the les-

sons of calm and rest, and no century ever needed him more than the turbulent nineteenth. In a striking passage in his *Autobiography*, John Stuart Mill confesses that Wordsworth brought him from darkness to light, and no greater tribute to the poet's power was ever paid than by this "logic-chopping engine:"

"I seemed to draw from a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared in by all human beings. . . . I seemed to learn what would be the perennial sources of happiness. . . . I felt myself at once better and happier."

Browning

THE last one of the giant race to make his appearance was Robert Browning. This unique figure has a double claim on our attention. Of all British poets he is the most truly original. After his boyhood he never came under the influence of his predecessors or

**Brown-
ing**

contemporaries, but struck out into entirely unbroken paths, in which his readers follow with security and delight. He wrote steadily for thirty years to a public which remained stolidly antagonistic; but he forced them finally into a complete acknowledgement of his genius. Besides his astonishing intellectual vigour and strange newness of expression, it is now commonly agreed that in the width of his sympathies, and in his analysis of all phases of human life and character, he has passed all other English poets except Shakspeare. He is the "subtle assessor of the soul in song." As a psychologist in verse he towers over all other writers of his century.

"Since Chaucer was alive and hale
No man has walked along our roads with step
So active, so enquiring eye, or tongue
So varied in discourse."

His resonant, triumphant voice drowns the chorus of lamentation sung by nineteenth-century poets all over the world.

The familiar note of yearning and vain regret was not in his register. His creed was positive, and is summed up in the conclusion of his first poem, *Pauline*: Browning

"I believe in God and truth
And love."

He was not afraid to be an unflinching optimist at exactly the time when pessimism was most fashionable. His optimism is more encouraging and stimulating than that of Emerson, because Browning clearly sees and recognizes the dark side of life. What he set forth in *Paracelsus* he maintained stoutly to the end,—the necessity of imperfection,—nay, the joy and glory of it. For imperfection is necessarily associated with progress and development, and the stumbling-block becomes the soul's stepping-stone. His treatment of religious doubt, which casts so deep a shadow over the work of his contemporaries, is a case in point. Were there no doubt, were the future life patent, there could be no real virtue.

Browning Virtue lies in the struggle, not in calm, submissive acquiescence.

“I count life just a stuff

To try the soul's strength on, educe the man.”

Everything in life can be made serviceable to the man strong in unselfishness, the man of faith and ideals. Perhaps the limitless extent of his optimism is shown best by his similitudes. He loves to take a proverb which reveals the unconscious pessimism of humanity, like “No rose without its thorn,” and twist it into a source of comfort. In the speech of the Pope in *The Ring and the Book*,—a speech that in some respects indicates the high-water mark of nineteenth century poetry,—we find this passage, which it is safe to say no one but Browning would have written :

“So a thorn

Comes to the aid of and completes the rose—

Courage to-wit, no woman's gift nor priest's.”

Browning is not a sedative : he is a tonic. Of all the great thought-leaders of the century, none is more thrilling, more

stimulating, and more encouraging in the **Byron**
call to manhood.

Byron

FEW literary men have had a greater intellectual endowment than Lord Byron. His genius has seldom been seriously doubted, and in fields of expression so far apart as song and satire he ranks with the masters. His keen wit and his lyrical gift are alike remarkable. Not many are the instances where a writer has in his own lifetime enjoyed a reputation and influence such as his. He is one of the greatest of germinal poets. With the exception of Jean Jacques Rousseau, whose strange figure always appears under every literary movement of modern times, Byron has perhaps influenced Continental letters more than any Englishman since his death. From Pushkin in the north to the Italians in the south, poetry in all languages was tinged with Byron's romantic melancholy. From the

Byron greatest writer of the modern epoch—
Goethe—down to the small fry who
merely act as literary thermometers, we
see plainly indicated the presence of the
great Spoiled Child. The spell of his
lovely melody is still potent, but his work
has one fatal taint,—insincerity. The
world did not need Byron's example to
prove that one may be a great poet with-
out being a good man. But the lack of
moral values is apt to prevent one from
realizing his highest possibilities as an
artist. That Byron accomplished at times
first-class work, that he was a first-class
poet, all unprejudiced critics must admit;
but if he had maintained an attitude to-
ward his art like that of Tennyson,—if, in
short, he had behaved like a responsible
person, there would have been less wasted
energy in his productions, and his influ-
ence would have been deeper and more
lasting. The great sin in his life is not his
sensual and other irregularities: it is the
use he made of his marvellous gifts. He

chose to write, not like a poet, but “like **Shelley** a gentleman.” With him poetry was not a sacred calling, not even an art : it was an accomplishment, like swimming and shooting. His work accordingly suffers. There is always the doubt of his sincerity : in his finest frenzies there is something of the *poseur*.

Shelley

ALTHOUGH Shelley died at the age of twenty-nine, he had apparently reached his full development. His death was a great loss to English literature, but not nearly so severe as that of Keats. It is doubtful if Shelley would ever have excelled his previous performances, which, to be sure, are splendid enough to make his position in English poetry unassailable. What is immediately noticeable in his work is the soaring quality of his imagination. Some genuine poets have their feet on the earth, like Ben Jonson and Dryden; some are “swimmers in

Shelley the atmosphere ;” but Shelley leaves the earth far behind, and sweeps away into the aether. Browning’s epithet was a happy one, — *Sun-treader*. Shelley is the eagle of poetry, whose pinions love thin air, and whose eyes look into the sun. He calls to us from lonely heights above the clouds, and we cannot always follow him, for we cannot breathe such rarefied air.

Y . . . As a lyrist and song-writer, he is second only to Shakspeare. His lyrics are ideals of what true lyrics should be, the expression of one mood in perfect song. Like his contemporary Keats, he made no important contribution to the thought of the age, but he left a priceless legacy of immortal forms of verse. His reputation has increased rather than diminished with the passage of time, and we see now that in his own field his followers have not reached him.

“Thou art gone from us ; years go by and Spring
Gladdens and the young earth is beautiful,
Yet thy songs come not ; other bards arise,
But none like thee.”

Tennyson

THE most representative poet of the nineteenth century, the laureate in fact as well as in name, is of course Alfred, Lord Tennyson. Living as he did in every decade of the century, his is not only its clearest singing voice, but the most faithful expression of its ideas. Tennyson was an all-around poet, succeeding in every department of poetry except the drama. There his lack of originality and of passion caused him to make almost a complete failure; for, in the truest sense of the word, Tennyson was not an original man; his mind, as reflected in his verse and particularly in the more intimate *Memoir* by his son, seems rather narrow and commonplace. He was profoundly interested in the great religious, moral, political, social, and scientific problems of his time; but he translated into verse the thoughts of others, instead of making any distinct contribution of

Tennyson his own. Like many writers, he stated problems rather than solved them. And underneath his clear and beautiful exposition, we find no deeply original or markedly individual point of view, as in *A Death in the Desert* or *Bishop Blougram's Apology*. But one of the truest functions of the poet is to *represent* clearly, to be the spokesman for his age ; and no one ever lived more fully up to this ideal than Tennyson. Practically all of the philosophical, scientific, and political thought of the nineteenth century may be found in his work, usually expressed in almost perfect forms of verse ; for Tennyson was a consummate artist. In epic, descriptive, narrative, and lyrical poetry he is now generally regarded as the foremost man of his epoch. Historically he is the child of Keats, and while perhaps he never wrote any one poem so perfect as the best productions of his master, he wrote so large an amount of admirable poetry that he exercised in his day an enormous

influence, not merely over hundreds of thousands of readers, but over all contemporary poets except Browning. And the loyal friendship of these two men is one of the beautiful things in the annals of literature, — as beautiful as the nobleness and purity of their lives.

Other Poets

BESIDES the poets of the first rank enumerated above, a considerable number of English writers have made permanent additions to poetical literature. Perhaps Coleridge and Mrs. Browning ought to be included in the first class: if that be so, the latter is the only woman who has a good claim to so exalted a position. In view of the fact that women have always loved and appreciated poetry, and that so prodigious a number of them have essayed poetic composition, the loneliness of Mrs. Browning is singular enough. Other poets of the cen-

The Masters of Prose

tury whose work will endure are Rossetti, Matthew Arnold, Scott, and possibly Swinburne, though the latter's fame appears to be already waning. Clough and Landor wrote some poems that will never be forgotten, and many writers have produced a few things that the world will not willingly let die. As for Kipling and Stephen Phillips, their best works may yet be unwritten. Let us hope, at any rate, that they may ultimately belong to the twentieth rather than to the nineteenth century.

The Masters of Prose

E NGLAND'S contribution to prose fiction during the nineteenth century was splendid. Novelists of the first rank are Scott, Jane Austen, Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, Stevenson; and to this roll of honour time will probably add the name of Thomas Hardy. In the early years of the century, Sir Walter looms up in colossal proportions. His style

was usually careless and often slipshod. **Stebenson**
He never produced a flawless masterpiece, **son**
and many of his productions cannot possibly be called works of art. But in power of invention he was a giant; he is one of the greatest of all literary athletes. His superabundant vitality breathed into his scenes of action and into his men and women the very breath of life. When we remember that in three successive years he produced *The Heart of Midlothian*, *The Bride of Lammermoor*, and *Ivanhoe*, we need not wonder that he has never been dethroned. He remains the king of English Romanticists.

Stebenson

WITH the brilliant exception of *Henry Esmond*, no English romances successfully challenged the best books of Walter Scott until, toward the end of the century, another Scotsman charmed the world with his tales of the heather and the sea, — Robert Louis Ste-

Stevenson venson. The stories of this sprightly invalid, written with an art unknown to Scott, are still in the first flush of their fame. His supreme achievement was to show that a book might be crammed with thrilling adventures, and yet reveal profound and acute analysis of character, and be adorned with all the graces of a beautiful literary style. The mere story holds us in breathless suspense ; but even in the most stirring moments the manner of the narrator never loses its distinction. He was a poet, a dramatist, an essayist, and a novelist; but his works of fiction, owing to their peculiar brightness and charm, have overshadowed his other writings. He had the rather unusual combination of the artist and the moralist, but he was not primarily a moral teacher. The virtue of his tales consists in their wholesome ethical quality, in their solid health. And apart from the intrinsic value of his books, Stevenson will in the future occupy a large place in the history of English fic-

tion, for his influence on other writers **Dickens** was exceedingly strong. The paradox is that from this sick man's chamber came the fresh, life-giving breeze that swept away the microbes from contemporary literature. Fresh air is often better for the soul than the swinging of the priest's censer. At a time when the school of naturalism was at its climax, Stevenson opened the windows. The oppressive sultriness vanished. And what he accomplished for his age, he will always accomplish for the individual. For the morbid and unhealthy period of adolescence, his books are more healthful than many didactic treatises.

Dickens

IN fiction, Dickens and Thackeray are the twin giants of the Victorian age, as Tennyson and Browning are in poetry. Their reputation is secure. It is true that a reaction against Dickens set in some time ago, but it was a movement both

Dickens futile and ephemeral. Tried by the most cruel of all tests, the test of time, which has taken away some of the glitter and tinsel from his name, we find the pure gold more bright than ever. Indeed, if we may judge by the enormous sales of his books in this present year (1907) and by the multiplication of serious critical works on his life and art, his power over humanity is greater than ever. What would the history of nineteenth century fiction have been without him? It is true that there are many things in his novels which repel fastidious readers. His tendency to make stump speeches in the midst of his narrative, his frequent descent to melodrama, and his unpleasantly sentimental pathos often jar harshly on sensitive minds. But the common people heard him gladly. He brought sunshine into thousands of shadowed hearts. His abounding humour, his overflowing human sympathy, and his immortal caricatures sprang from a vital force that age

cannot wither nor custom stale. *Pickwick Papers, Bleak House, David Copperfield,*—**Thackeray** can time lessen the greatness of such mighty encyclopaedias of life?

Thackeray

THACKERAY'S reputation has never been bitterly assailed like that of his great contemporary, possibly because the number of his readers was, and is, not nearly so large. Every passing year finds his name brighter, the circle of his thoughtful admirers wider, and his position in English literature firmer. In the history of English fiction perhaps no one has a better claim to first place. The charge of snobbery and cynicism, made so often against his personal character in his lifetime, is now seen to have no foundation. It is curious that many readers still call his books cynical, for his brilliant pages constantly reveal two qualities wholly incompatible with cynicism,—sympathy

Thackeray and enthusiasm. His sympathy with humanity, though not so demonstratively expressed as that of Dickens, was fully as keen. Indeed, the chief defect in his writings comes from a nature exactly the opposite of the cynic's,—that of the preacher. Like so many Englishmen, he is not content to let his creations speak for themselves, like the lilies of the field; in the most thrilling point of the drama he must forget the rôle of impersonality and don the preacher's vestments. This unfortunate mannerism makes *The Newcomes*, in spite of its great death scene, irritating to many readers and in places almost unendurable. But at its best Thackeray's art is impeccable. *Vanity Fair*, with its unforgettable characters, and *Henry Esmond*, the best historical romance in the language, are books that no other man could have written; and if anything may be called the pure gold of literature, it is surely such works as these.

Jane Austen

JANE AUSTEN and George Eliot are the only women novelists of the century who may unhesitatingly be assigned to the first class. In her time Miss Austen's novels were as completely overshadowed by the mighty works of Walter Scott as her physical strength would have been by his robust masculine vigour. But she was one of those rare individuals who are content to work for the sake of the work alone. "Art for art's sake," a proverb as grievously mishandled as *Honi soit*, is peculiarly applicable to the novels of this extraordinary maiden. She created masterpiece after masterpiece, seeking no recognition and finding little, but working with no less painstaking art. She could not have written books like *Pride and Prejudice* without realizing to some extent their solid worth; but she would indeed have been amazed had she received a revelation of her twentieth century fame.

George Eliot Time has redeemed and paid in full all her drafts upon the future, and she possesses to-day a wealth of reputation which cannot be stolen by aspiring rivals nor corrupted by the rust of years. In her books the style is so perfectly adapted to the matter that to the uninitiated it often seems no style at all. It is the final triumph of art,—the exact counterfeit of nature. Never progressing into strange or forbidden territory, never resorting to adventure or excitement, her books hold our attention by their likeness to life. She succeeded to a high degree in producing the *illusion* which is the essence of all great art: we do not feel that her persons are creatures of the imagination; they rather seem to belong among our intimate acquaintances.

George Eliot

GEORGE ELIOT had the good fortune to see her literary children

receive the warm welcome they so richly deserved. Indeed, it is possible that the number of her readers is not quite so large to-day as it was in her declining years. If this be true, it is a lamentable fact, probably due in part to the recent rage for romanticism, and in part also because her career was something of an anticlimax. She drifted away from the great currents of art toward the dreary doldrums of philosophy and sociology. With the possible exception of Mrs. Browning, she had perhaps the most powerful feminine intellect among the English of the century, and her learning sometimes hindered rather than helped her progress. She was an intensely serious woman, and she seemed to forget that nothing is more truly serious than a great portrayal of life artistically and reverently made. Her best books were her first: as time advances, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss* stand out supreme, while *Daniel Deronda* is slowly falling under its

George
Eliot

Hardy own weight. We may be sure, no matter what the caprices and fluctuations of literary fashions may be, that George Eliot will never be forgotten, and that the dust will never accumulate on her noble volumes. Such wisdom as hers is too precious to be long neglected; and in every age there will be discriminating readers, who, weary of the showiness that so often accompanies superficiality, will turn to her rich pages and find life indeed.

Hardy

HOSTS of other novelists of the century might be mentioned if there were space. We are looking only at the foremost names. Among living novelists, Thomas Hardy stands easily first. His work during thirty years, always conscientious if sometimes mistaken, represents a level of excellence that none of his contemporaries, not even the erratic and brilliant Meredith, can equal. The

rustic cackle of his bourg drowns the **Hardy** murmur of the world, which stops to hear the human comedy played, ever old and ever new, in incomparable Wessex. He is the great pessimist of our age, as Stevenson was its joyous optimist. But his pessimism is not the result of a mind out of tune, nor is it flavoured with the gall of the cynic. His pessimism rises from an almost abnormal sympathy with humanity. The depths of tenderness in this man are stirred by the spectacle of hideous suffering in which he imagines all persons but himself to live and move and have their being. He will, therefore, be the spokesman for humanity's pain. He will speak for the chained Prometheus, and call the world to witness its own sorrow and revise its creed of a loving Divinity. His pessimism, then, is sympathetic and temperamental: he cannot see life in any other way. But the shadow of his works is lightened by a sense of humour deliciously keen and true. His

Carlyle Shaksperian shepherds touch the springs of loving laughter in our hearts, and make an irresistible appeal by their unworldly harmlessness. Furthermore his books are artistic wholes, living organisms, examples of what novels should be. Such a story as *The Return of the Native* is entirely beyond the power of most contemporary writers.

Carlyle

IN our review of the century we are purposely omitting everything but pure literature. Of historical, scientific, theological, political, and religious writers there have been enough and to spare: we are confining ourselves to men of letters. Outside of the fields of poetry and the novel, the greatest figure of the century is unquestionably Thomas Carlyle. His influence was so mighty that even if there should be a public conflagration of every one of his books, his spirit would

still be a potent force; for he impressed **Carlyle** himself so ~~deeply~~ upon the men of the fifties and sixties that he has become a part of the inheritance of later generations. His trumpet call to duty is still ringing in our ears; and our hearts are renewed within us as we remember his familiar watchwords. This grim prophet, who looked upon the so-called progress of the age with gloomy eyes, might have seen some hope in the fact that the people of the very age he despised, listened most eagerly to his teachings. The more violently he flogged them, the more keenly they seemed to enjoy the scourge. And the reason for this is plain. Wholly apart from his tremendous force and power for righteousness, he was one of the greatest literary artists that England has ever produced. As a portrait-painter his accuracy is thrilling; in depicting the grotesque he has no equal among the moderns; and his humour, always grim, is ever spontaneous and seizes us with contagious

Ruskin,
Macaulay, and
Others

force. He is never dull, and to read him is a perpetual delight. In his case the style was certainly the man; and he seems destined to rank in a place all by himself.

Ruskin, Macaulay, and Others

RUSKIN also spoke out loud and bold, but too often he was hoarse. He performed an inestimable service for his century by revealing to English Philistines the beauties and glories of art. He is still an inspiration to many, but his reputation is surely diminishing. That no one was ever written down except by himself is as true now as on the day when it was first spoken; and the wild incoherent ravings of Ruskin have not only raised a laugh among the unskilful, but have made the judicious grieve. Had he confined his sphere to matters on which he was an acknowledged authority, he would stand out to-day much clearer than is actually the case. How strangely

different is the position of Charles Lamb! Without a tithe of Ruskin's moral earnestness, he had such delightful amenity, such wideness of mercy, and so delicate and pervasive humour that it is possible his works will be read with pleasure after Ruskin has become merely a name. Over the pages of the *Essays of Elia* hovers an immortal charm.

Landor's stately prose has a small but select circle of admirers, and some of his work is gold. However, he seems destined in another hundred years to join the illustrious dead whose names are familiar to all students of literary history, but whom nobody reads. That is already the case with Southey,—whose verse was not mentioned in the review of the poets, simply because readers have decided to let him alone,—a man who still has a great fame, but no friends—not even an enemy. The gentle Leigh Hunt is also receding, but for a different reason: he is not dull, but faint. Many other once

Ruskin,
Macaulay,
and
Others

